Author's Note

The ideas presented in this essay are the product of my own reflection on human love, marriage, and relationships, inspired by philosophical and theological sources. While I have drawn on the works of Plato and Orthodox thought for conceptual framing, the reasoning, observations, and conclusions—especially regarding the interaction of Eros and agape, the divine "test" of love, and the practical implications for dating—are my own. I wrote this at age 17, and it represents my personal synthesis of these complex ideas.

Eros, Agape, and the Divine Test of Love: A Philosophical and Theological Reflection

Love, in its many forms, has been a central concern of philosophers, theologians, and human experience for millennia. To understand the dynamics of love in human relationships, it is helpful to draw upon both Platonic philosophy and Orthodox Christian theology. Plato distinguished between Eros—the passionate, often involuntary desire toward beauty or goodness—and a higher, more rational love that seeks the eternal and the good. In Orthodox thought, love manifests in two complementary ways: the natural, emotional attraction between human beings, often analogous to Eros, and agape, the self-giving, sacrificial love that mirrors God's love for humanity. These frameworks provide a lens through which we can examine the evolution of romantic relationships and the "tests" they may face over time.

Eros, in human relationships, is the initial spark—the attraction, passion, and intense joy that accompany falling in love. This phase is largely involuntary: we cannot choose when or with whom we first feel this attraction. The intensity of Eros brings happiness and excitement, but it is inherently transient. Human emotions, no matter how profound, are designed to fluctuate. This impermanence is not a flaw; rather, it serves a divine purpose. When the initial excitement fades, couples are confronted with a choice: to continue their love or to let it dissipate. It is here that agape—the deliberate, selfless commitment to the other—becomes essential.

Agape represents the conscious choice to act lovingly, even when feelings are lukewarm or absent. It is expressed through acts of service, patience, forgiveness, and fidelity. Orthodox theology emphasizes that enduring love is not contingent upon feelings alone but is cultivated through deliberate action and moral discipline. Plato's notion of ascending from Eros to the contemplation of the Good resonates with this: the initial attraction prompts the journey, but true love is realized through deliberate alignment with higher ideals. When a couple acts in agape, they participate in divine love, cultivating a foundation that can sustain the relationship even when passion fades.

This dynamic gives rise to what can be termed the "test" of love. As Eros naturally diminishes over time—a process that God may allow—the couple is challenged to rely on agape. Those who fail this test, particularly in the context of premature marriage, may encounter divorce, which Orthodox tradition views as tragic, though sometimes permissible under specific circumstances. Conversely, couples who cultivate both Eros and agape from the outset are positioned to weather these challenges. Their deliberate practice of agape sustains the relationship, and in many cases,

Eros naturally rekindles, reflecting the harmonious design of human emotions and divine providence.

Observing older marriages highlights these dynamics in practice. Some couples, though appearing distant, bitter, or emotionally “cold” at times, continue to stay together and act in love for decades. These couples often operate largely on agape alone, without the visible thrill of Eros, yet their consistent commitment preserves the relationship. Other older couples seem to act like newlyweds regardless of age. In such cases, either the couple passed the divine “test,” rekindling Eros through their practice of agape, or God chose not to test them, allowing Eros to remain continuously present. Importantly, since Eros is entirely out of human control, its presence or absence does not determine the value or legitimacy of the relationship. What matters is the conscious, willing practice of agape.

It is also important to acknowledge that some couples may operate primarily on agape. Their love, while lacking the dramatic thrill of Eros, is faithful and enduring. They may face conflicts and challenges, yet they continue to act in love, demonstrating the essential role of choice and moral commitment. In other instances, God may allow Eros to remain continuously present or may even forgo the “test” entirely for couples who demonstrate maturity, foresight, and fidelity in their love. In all scenarios, the combination of Eros and agape, or the disciplined practice of agape alone, aligns human love with divine intention.

From this understanding, one can draw practical conclusions for navigating romantic relationships. To cultivate enduring love, a couple should strive to develop both Eros and agape simultaneously. Eros provides joy, attraction, and passion, while agape establishes the resilience necessary to endure trials and maintain commitment. By intentionally fostering both, couples prepare themselves for the inevitable fluctuations of emotion and the potential “tests” of fading passion. In doing so, they align their relationship with divine providence, creating the conditions for Eros to rekindle naturally and for agape to sustain the union, regardless of external circumstances.

This framework also carries important implications for dating. During dating, couples almost always experience Eros—the natural spark and excitement of attraction. Dating is the ideal period to discern whether agape—the conscious willingness to act selflessly and sacrificially for the other—is present. If agape is lacking, it is better to break up, as no harm or sin is incurred; the relationship has not yet entered the sacramental realm of marriage. When agape is evident alongside Eros, the couple can reasonably consider proceeding toward marriage, confident that their love has both the emotional and moral foundations necessary to endure the future “tests” of life together. This understanding underscores why sexual activity should be preserved for marriage: doing so ensures that the consequences of discovering a lack of agape can be navigated without moral harm, sin, or the burdens of broken covenants. In practical terms, couples can experience Eros in dating—holding hands, kissing, and enjoying mutual attraction—but should ensure that a serious intention to act in agape exists before moving beyond those boundaries.

In conclusion, love begins as a gift—an involuntary attraction marked by Eros—but its enduring power depends on choice, manifested through agape. God’s design may test couples through the natural fading of passion, but those who cultivate both forms of love from the start are equipped to persevere. Eros may return, persist, or be complemented by agape alone, yet in all cases,

deliberate self-giving love ensures the relationship's stability and sanctity. Observations of long marriages demonstrate that love can manifest in different ways: some rely largely on agape, while others experience a rekindling or sustained Eros. Since Eros is beyond human control, it does not define the relationship's legitimacy or spiritual value. Dating, therefore, is the time to discern agape and ensure that emotional attraction is matched by moral commitment, with sexual intimacy reserved for marriage. By recognizing the interplay of divine intention, human emotion, and conscious choice, couples can navigate the complexities of love, pass its tests when they appear, and participate in the profound, life-giving experience that is the union of two souls in God's design.

Footnote: On the Interaction of Eros and Agape

Plato observed that Eros often initiates desire toward beauty and goodness, which can motivate virtuous actions in the lover: "Eros compels the soul to seek the good and the beautiful, and through this pursuit, the soul may approach virtue."[1] Orthodox thought similarly notes that agape —the deliberate, self-giving love—can sustain and even rekindle Eros over time. St. Maximus the Confessor wrote, "Love that is chosen and exercised in accordance with God's will strengthens the soul, and through steadfast devotion, the heart comes to desire what it has already willed in virtue."[2] In practical terms, Eros can spark acts resembling agape, but true, lasting agape requires conscious choice; conversely, agape nurtured consistently may awaken or restore Eros, creating a harmonious cycle of love in human relationships.

---

[1] Plato, Symposium, 206d–207a.

[2] St. Maximus the Confessor, Ambigua 7.

So, yes, Eros CAN create agape over time, but no one should marry beforehand thinking "my Eros will create my agape, or do so for my partner". If Eros creates agape, it would come in a realization or revelation on the subject at some point. That realization then creates the obvious need for a choice.

In Today's culture, too many have not been taught the importance of these things. Instead, they are encouraged to "love whomever". And I believe that is the reason why divorce rates have climbed so high in recent years, in conjunction with rising liberal and "progressive Christian" ideals. That being said, it is not fair to constrain love to my slightly legalistic ideas. However, I do

believe this explanation serves as the backbone for the logic of love. Even if correctly educated on the subject, couples will almost certainly have to “figure things out” on their own and in their own way. I do not expect that by reading this paper, a couple will automatically know their situation. But I hope I have provided at least some theological and philosophical insight on the subject of love.

-Travis Hiepe, 2025